Carnegie Mellon University
Graduate Student Housing Handbook

Last updated May 31, 2024 with special contributions from Mary Alice Groat, Shengyu Feng, Haochen Zhang, Olivia Haberberger, and Anthony Cheng (GSA VP of Campus Affairs)

What is the GSA?

The Graduate Student Assembly (GSA) is the branch of student government that represents graduate students at Carnegie Mellon. GSA consists of an elected executive board and a voting body of representatives from every graduate program at Carnegie Mellon. Funding for the GSA comes from graduate students' student activities fees and, as such, all graduate students are members of GSA.

Our mission: To advocate for and support the diverse needs of all Carnegie Mellon University graduate students in their personal, professional, and public lives.

We accomplish this by:

- Organizing social events throughout the year hosted both on and off campus
- Advocating, both on campus and with local and national government agencies, regarding issues important to graduate students
- Supporting various forms of personal and professional development (including hosting workshops and providing financial support for conference attendance and research)
- Providing funding support for other graduate student organizations

Contact us at gsa@andrew.cmu.edu, and/or give us feedback via our Engagement form!

Table of Contents

Welcome Letter & How to Use This Handbook

Dear (Potential) Graduate Student,

Welcome to Pittsburgh! Whether you are considering applying to Carnegie Mellon, accepting an offer to attend, or are currently a student, this guide was created to aid you in finding housing in the greater Pittsburgh region. With its amenities, cultural attractions, and relatively affordable cost of living, Pittsburgh consistently ranks among the most livable cities in the world.

It has been an ongoing concern for the Graduate Student Assembly's (GSA) Campus Affairs Committee that many students have had difficulty understanding the dynamics of Pittsburgh and its housing market before they arrive, sometimes resulting in poor housing situations. This has been an especially significant problem for our large international student population, who may have never been able to visit the city or even the United States before arriving during orientation.

This guide provides general information and tips for searching and selecting a property, focusing primarily on popular neighborhoods among CMU graduate students and their associated transportation options. We primarily focus on renters (see for example Appendix 1, our checklist for signing a lease), though there is a new section about purchasing a home in Pittsburgh.

As you will see, surveys conducted by the GSA reveal a wide range in reported cost of living. This is due to several factors, including number of roommates, distance from campus, and the general quality of the residence. Throughout your housing search, it may be useful to remind yourself of the old saying: **"You get what you pay for."** While it can be tempting to base your housing decision on cost alone, there are a number of factors that you should consider before signing a lease. Among these are safety, transportation access, fresh food, and healthcare. Any unnecessary energy or stress spent on your commute to campus or haggling with your landlord over a utility bill could detract from your academic responsibilities; as a student, keep in mind that time is your most valuable commodity.

This guide is meant to provide information to prevent a bad rental scenario rather than resolving a problem after one has arisen, though the GSA has invested in Legal Consultations for graduate students' potential legal issues, particularly regarding housing. This guide itself does not constitute legal advice.

As always, the GSA Executive Board and Representatives are happy to hear your concerns so we can better advocate on your behalf! We look forward to meeting you at our social events!

Sincerely,
Anthony Cheng, GSA VP of Campus Affairs, and the Graduate Student Assembly's Campus Affairs Committee 2023-2024

Table of Contents

Click the link on each heading to skip directly to that section.

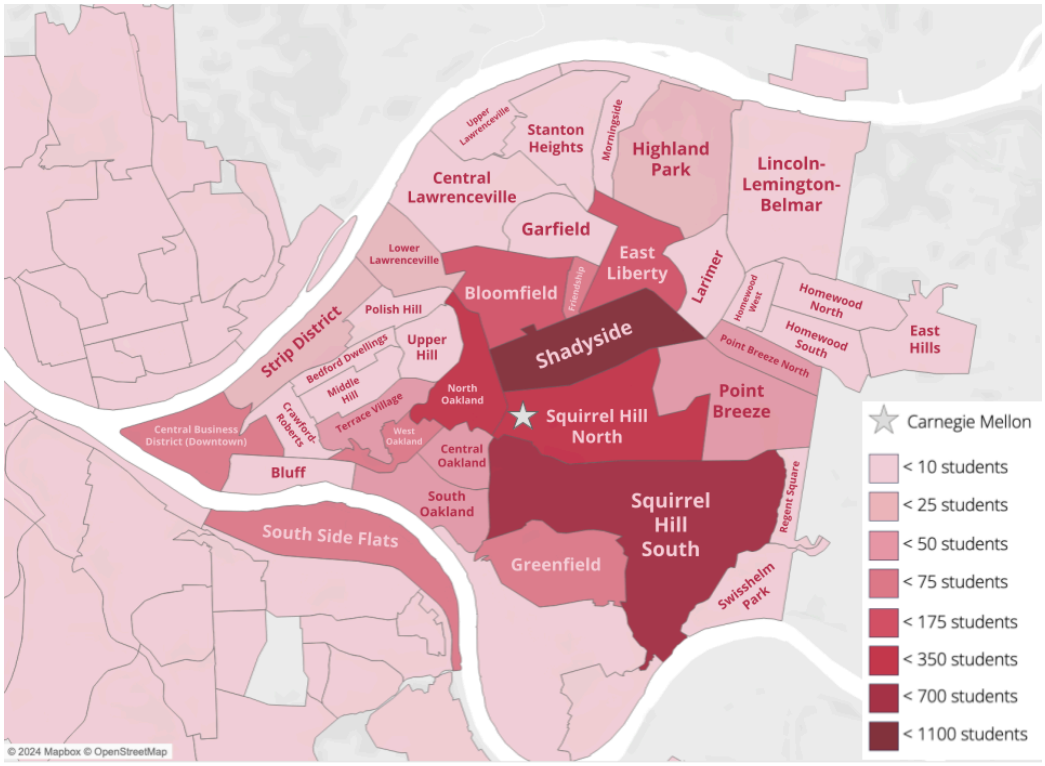
What is the GSA? 0
Welcome Letter & How to Use This Handbook 1
Table of Contents 2
Introduction 3
Where CMU Graduate Students Live 3
Pittsburgh Neighborhoods, Amenities, and Attractions 4
Shadyside 4
Squirrel Hill (North and South) 4
Oakland (North, South, and West) 4
Other Neighborhoods 5
Groceries 5
Other Attractions and Activities 6
Data from Student Surveys 8
Transportation to and from Campus 10
Walking Commute 10
Biking Commute 10
Public Bus Commute 11
Carnegie Mellon Shuttle & Escort Commute 12
Driving Commute 13
CMU Transportation Alternatives for Nearby Amenities 14
Renting Basics 15
About Leases 15
Scams 15
Your legal rights as a tenant 15
Basic Apartment Information 16
Payment of Rent 16
Utilities 16
Trash and Recycling 17
Laundry 17
Parking 17
Accessibility 18
Rental Management Companies 18
Purchasing a Home in Pittsburgh 19
Additional Resources 20
Web Pages and links maintained by (other) CMU entities 20
Other Resources 20
Appendix 1: Signing a Lease: A Checklist 21
Appendix 2: Revisions Log 24

Table of Contents

Introduction

The City of Pittsburgh is situated around three rivers: the Allegheny, the Monongahela ("Mon"), and the Ohio. About 300,000 people call the City of Pittsburgh their home, and an additional 2 million reside in the surrounding suburbs. Downtown Pittsburgh stretches eastward from "the Point", where all three rivers meet, to the "East End" in Oakland and Shadyside, where the campus of Carnegie Mellon is located. It is connected to the "North Side", "South Side", and "West End" by over 400 bridges.

Where CMU Graduate Students Live



This map was created using the addresses of Fall 2023 graduate students, as reported to the University Registrar. Darkly shaded areas indicate a higher density of CMU students. While there are students living throughout the city, Shadyside, Squirrel Hill (North and South), and Oakland are among the most popular neighborhoods. More recently, the Central Business District and South Side Flats have become more popular in spite of their relative distance to CMU.

Additionally, given the relatively cheap cost of living, several graduate students with families and/or looking to put down roots, have found purchasing a home in Pittsburgh, particularly its greater metropolitan area, to be affordable. As a result, several graduate students have found a home in the surrounding townships and cities like Wilkinsburg, Monroeville, Ross, and Mt Lebanon.

Table of Contents

Pittsburgh Neighborhoods, Amenities, and Attractions

Shadyside

Attitude: Shadyside is a well-developed, relatively upscale neighborhood in Pittsburgh. It's in the center of the East End, and you'll pay extra for the honor of living here. Shadyside has a suburb feel while still being in the urban center.
Where the happenings happen: Ellsworth Ave, Walnut St, S. Highland Ave, Centre Ave
What's happening: Yuppie bars of Walnut Street, brand name stores (Apple, Sephora, Lululemon), Noodlehead, Trivia bars/ restaurants (5801, Urban Tap, Shady Grove, Mario's), Market District Supermarket, Hunt Armory Skate Rink, Mellon Park
Rough distance to campus: 5-10 min. by car, 15-30 min. by foot

Squirrel Hill (North and South)

A Publication of the Squirrel Hill Urban Coalition
Squirrel Hill
Magazine
Vol 19 | Issue 1
September 2021
COMMUNITY CHAMPIONS
SQUIRREL HILL REVIEW: OFF THE BEATEN PATH
FIND THE HELPERS: A LEGACY OF KINDNESS
THE 2021 SQUIRREL HILL TREASURES

Attitude: The traditionally Jewish neighborhood of the city, Squirrel Hill is a quiet and beautiful area that now has a very significant multicultural presence (particularly Asian food). The architecture tends to be older and very elaborate, with large mansions that are often now split into apartments.
Where the happenings happen: Forbes Ave, Murray Ave
What's happening: Pigeon Bagel, many Asian restaurants (Taiwanese Bistro Cafe 33, Chengdu Gourmet, Kiin Lao, Sichuan Gourmet, Everyday Noodles, etc.), Manor Theatre, Five Points Artisan Bakeshop, Night Markets, Frick Park, Schenley Park
Rough distance to campus: 5-15 min. by car, 15-45 min. by foot.

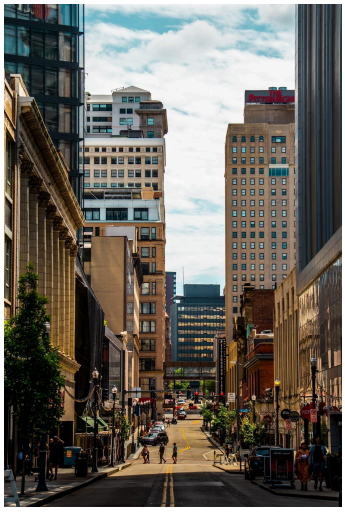
Oakland (North, South, and West)

Attitude: The heart of the University of Pittsburgh ("Pitt"), Oakland bustles with undergrads, hospitals, and quick eats. The housing tends to be just the bare minimum, and traffic backs up on Forbes and Fifth during rush hour.
Where the happenings happen: Craig St, Forbes Ave
What's happening: Schenley Plaza and Park, the Cathedral of Learning, the Carnegie Library, Museum, and Hall, fast casual restaurants catering to the university crowd (esp. fried chicken), South O's restaurants (by far open the latest in the city, between 3-4AM every day)
Rough distance to campus: 5-10 min. by car, 10-20 min. by foot.

Table of Contents

Other Neighborhoods

Lawrenceville: rapidly gentrifying, many amazing restaurants centered around Butler Street. Ineffable Cà Phê, Mi Empanada, Cork Harbour Pub, Pusadee's Garden, Morcilla, Dijlah, Arsenal Cider House, Arsenal Bowling, Arsenal Park
Bloomfield: Pittsburgh's little Italy, ironically centered around Liberty Avenue, between the busway and Penn Avenue. Apteka, Cobra, Trace Brewing
East Liberty: rapidly gentrifying around Duolingo headquarters and Bakery Square (Google/ Philips). Whole Foods, Target, Trader Joe's, East End Brewing Company, Home Depot, etc.



Greenfield: a highly affordable and highly residential neighborhood south of Squirrel Hill, but not much goes on here.
The Strip: Rough and tumble industrial district turned tech hub (AI, Robotics, Self-driving cars). Original Primanti Bro's, diners (Kelly O's, Pamela's, DeLuca's), Salem's Market and Grill, Wholey's, Puttshack, Puttery, Sandbox VR
Downtown: The financial district and erstwhile city center, but not that popular of a destination. Pittsburgh Cultural District (Convention Center, Heinz Hall, Benedum Center, Heinz History Center), the Point State Park, Fort Pitt Museum, Market Square, Nicky's Thai, Gaucho Parrilla Argentina, Con Alma, many festivals

Groceries

The local grocery chain is **Giant Eagle** (who also operate the Market District), though national alternatives such as Aldi, Whole Foods, Trader Joe's, Costco, and others are options. Small neighborhood stores and bodega-style establishments are options as well. Local chains are also a prominent part of Pittsburgh, from Salem's Market (Halal and Middle-Eastern; who also operate CMU's on-campus store, Scotty's Market), Lotus Food Company (Asian), Reyna Foods (Latin), and Wholey's (American) in the Strip District, to Panda Supermarket (East Asian) in Squirrel Hill, and small purveyors Kohli's Indian Imports and Seoul Mart in Oakland, right off of campus, there are a surprisingly wide variety of options for all sorts of food in Pittsburgh. Pittsburgh also has a wide variety of farmer's markets which can provide healthy, fresh food at a relatively low cost.
Of note for Pittsburgh, being in Pennsylvania, has restrictive laws around 'bulk' alcohol sales (namely, not at restaurants). Beer, hard seltzer, and cider can be sold at beer distributors (though quantity depends on license). Wine and Liquor must be purchased at the state-owned *Fine Wine and Good Spirits* store. Wine can also be purchased directly at wineries.
CMU conveniently provides shuttle transportation to Whole Foods and Trader Joe's to and from campus - see more in the 'CMU Transportation Alternatives for Nearby Amenities' section.

Table of Contents

Other Attractions and Activities

As part of the student activities fee, graduate students have access to numerous museums and attractions through the CMU Arts Pass. In addition to the nearby Carnegie Museum of Natural History, Carnegie Museum of Art, and Phipps Conservatory, students can access the Andy Warhol Museum, Mattress Factory, Carnegie Science Center, and National Aviary, all located in the North Shore neighborhood. CMU also hosts the Pittsburgh Connections program, which sponsors outdoor and cultural adventures in the Pittsburgh area. Past trips include whitewater rafting, hiking, skiing, haunted houses, farms, tours, and more.

Pittsburgh is home to 165 beautiful parks, located all over the city and its surrounding areas. *Schenley Park* is just a stone's throw away from CMU's campus with dozens of landmark attractions and iconic monuments. Its botanical garden, Phipps Conservatory, is open to all CMU students for free as part of the Arts Pass. *Frick Park* is a beloved hiking destination with extensive trails throughout steep valleys and wooded slopes. It stretches from its northern borders in Point Breeze down to the Monongahela River, is home to the historic Frick House Museum and Gardens. The Pittsburgh Parks Conservancy is a great resource for all things Pittsburgh Parks, and often sponsors programs and events close to CMU's campus.

Pittsburgh is very proud of its sports teams, being home to three major professional sports teams – the Pittsburgh Steelers (American football), Pittsburgh Penguins (hockey), and Pittsburgh Pirates (baseball), who have all won league titles. Because of their success, Pittsburgh's team have aligned their colors–black and gold–to match the flag of Pittsburgh, the only major city in the United States in which all professional sporting teams share the same colors.

Table of Contents

Pittsburgh is also home to the Pittsburgh Riverhounds SC, a second-division soccer (football) team and Pittsburgh Passion, a women's American football team. The University of Pittsburgh (Pitt) is also well known for its athletics, with its football games and basketball games drawing fans from throughout the region.

In the greater Pittsburgh area, there are a number of classic and contemporary attractions, from staples like trivia bars, bowling venues, Dave and Busters and minigolf, to the Kennywood, Idlewood, and Sandcastle amusement parks, to the world-renowned Fallingwater architectural installation and surrounding outdoors area of Ohiopyle. The three rivers and many hills of and around Pittsburgh lend themselves to kayaking, hiking, bike trails, and surprisingly good views. Over twenty theaters, concert halls and event spaces host the world-renowned Pittsburgh symphony, musicals, shows, and concerts. Unique Pittsburgh-only attractions like the Carrie Blast Furnaces at the Rivers of Steel and Inclines of Mount Washington provide glimpses into Pittsburgh's industrial past (the inclines are part of the public transit system, too, so graduate students can ride them for free!). Most of these attractions are most easily accessed by car, and often by public transit. CMU and GSA often offer discounted tickets for these attractions, so keep an eye peeled for those announcement emails.

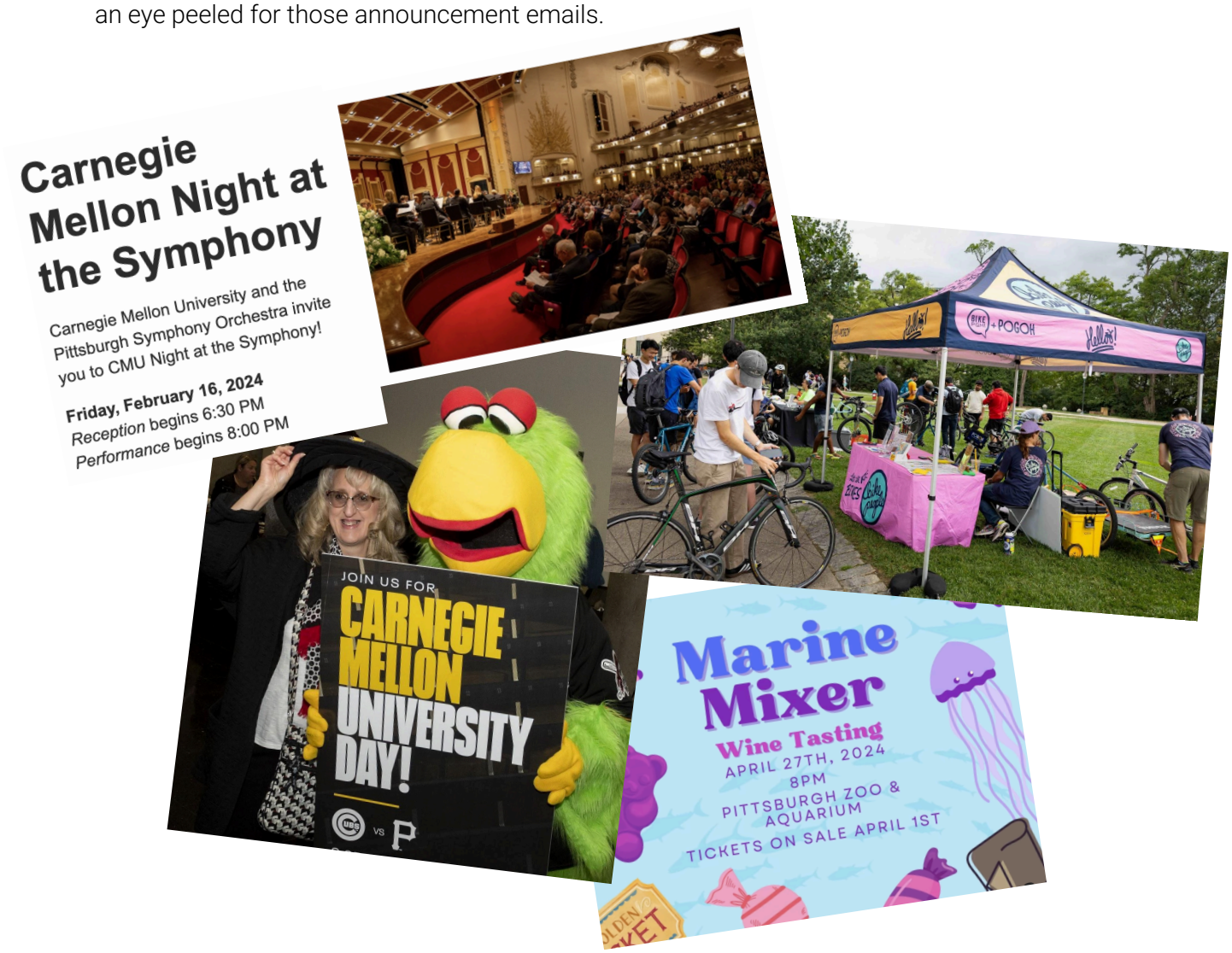
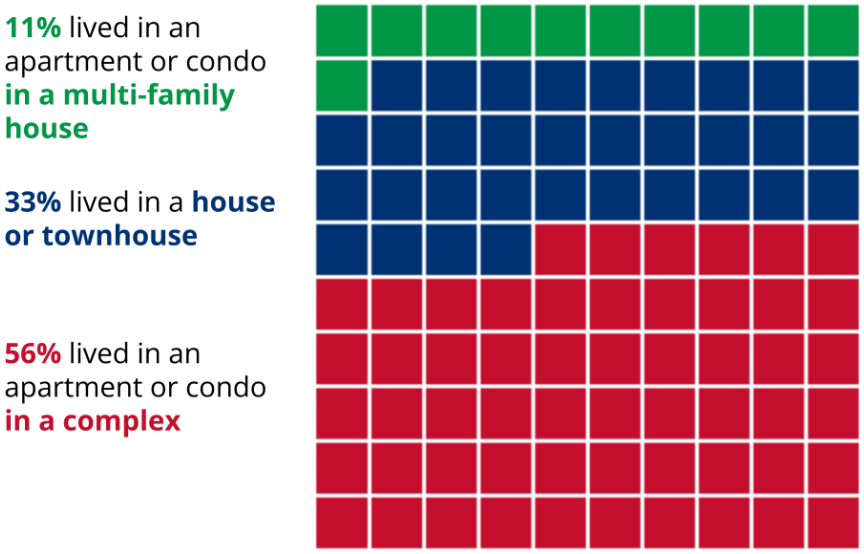

Carnegie Mellon Night at the Symphony
Carnegie Mellon University and the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra invite you to CMU Night at the Symphony!
Friday, February 16, 2024
Reception begins 6:30 PM
Performance begins 8:00 PM
JOIN US FOR
CARNEGIE MELLON UNIVERSITY DAY!
Marine Mixer
Wine Tasting
APRIL 27TH, 2024
8PM
PITTSBURGH ZOO & AQUARIUM
TICKETS ON SALE APRIL 1ST

Table of Contents

Data from Student Surveys

To get an overview of the living arrangements of current Carnegie Mellon graduate students, we surveyed 36 GSA representatives in Fall 2023 from departments across the university, which was also supplemented by a university-wide survey of 140 students administered by the Mechanical Engineering Graduate Students Organization (MEGSO) in Spring 2023. While the results are not completely representative of the graduate experience, we hope it paints a relatively good picture of what most students are experiencing. The primary survey findings are provided in the charts below.


11% lived in an apartment or condo in a multi-family house
33% lived in a house or townhouse
56% lived in an apartment or condo in a complex

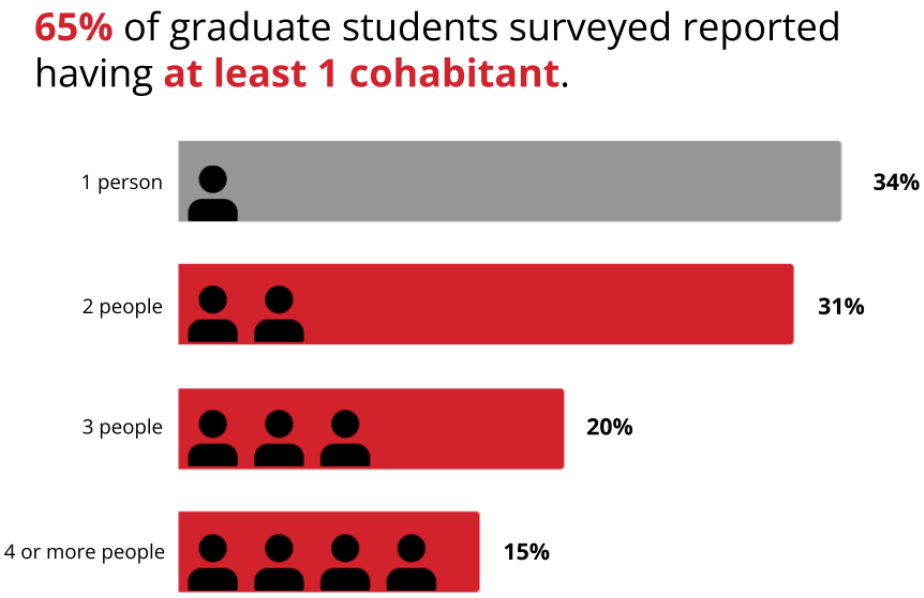
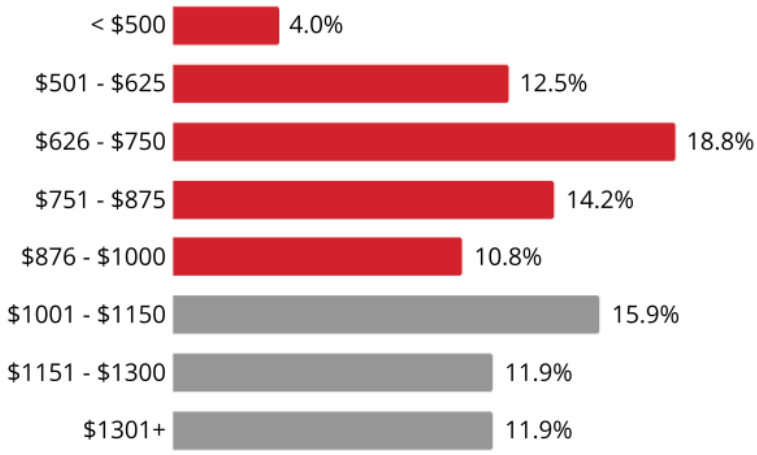


Table of Contents



Almost 70%
of students paid
$1000 or less
per person for monthly living expenses
(i.e. rent + utilities)

40%
found housing through a **Rental Website**, (e.g. Zillow, Redfin, Apartments.com)

21%
found housing through **Friends or Word-of-Mouth**

16%
found housing through **Social Media** (e.g. Facebook Groups)

12%
found housing through **a CMU Resource** e.g. the off-campus housing website

9%
found housing through **Other Means**

2%
found housing through **Craigslist** (though we would not recommend this method)

Table of Contents

Transportation to and from Campus

Here we present maps generated using TravelTime that show the accessibility of CMU's campus using different transportation routes. We suggest that transportation is a key factor in helping you determine where you plan to live, depending on how you plan to commute to campus. Remember - you get what you pay for, and your time is valuable.

Walking Commute

The areas accessible from CMU's campus by a 30 minute walking commute include parts of the neighborhoods of North Oakland, Squirrel Hill and Shadyside and includes areas around Schenley Park. These neighborhoods are relatively safe to walk - however, Pittsburgh is an urban area, like any other city. Be mindful of walking alone at night and always stay aware of your surroundings.

30 minute walking isochrome from CMU

Biking Commute

Pittsburgh has been slowly becoming a more bike-friendly city, with bicycle shops in Bloomfield, Squirrel Hill, Shadyside, South Side, and Lawrenceville, as well as many trails and parks. BikePGH has a few good resources on biking in Pittsburgh. Be sure to consider foul weather routes though as Pittsburgh is a cloudy, rainy city that sees its fair share of cold and snowy weather in winter. CMU currently has one POGOH bikeshare stand on campus, but expansion efforts are underway. Learn more about CMU's bike options here, including registering your bike. If you're interested in joining GSA's advocacy around biking on campus, reach out using our Engage with GSA form or email the VP Campus Affairs.

Table of Contents

30 minute biking isochrome from CMU

By a 30 minute biking commute, the accessible neighborhoods extend to downtown Pittsburgh, the Strip District, parts of South Side and Mt. Washington, Wilkinsburg, Highland Park, Lawrenceville and parts of the North Side, though some of these areas may be harder to reach than you expect because of Pittsburgh's hills. Getting an e-bike may be a good idea if you intend to use bikes as your primary means of transportation.

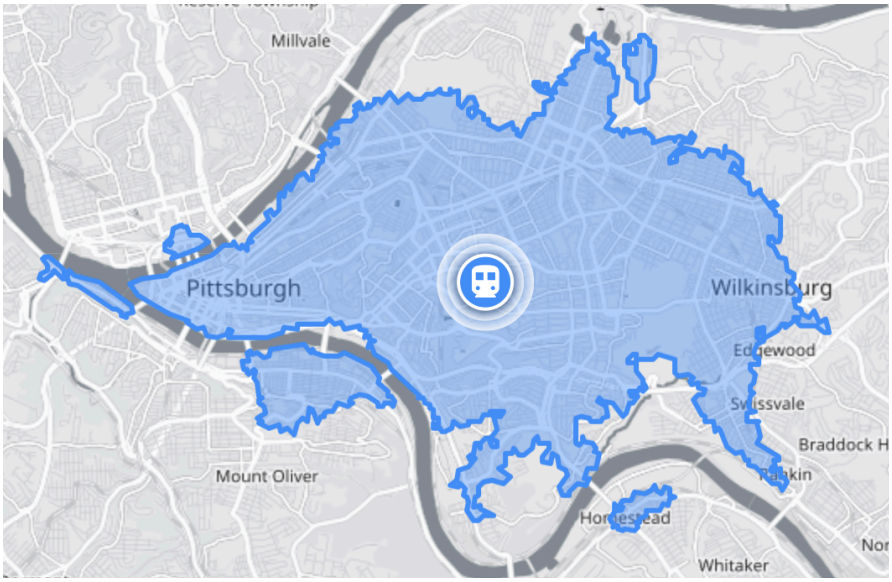
Public Bus Commute

The Allegheny County Pittsburgh Regional Transit (PRT) System provides extensive coverage of the city and the areas around CMU. **All CMU graduate students can use their ID card to access the bus at no additional cost**, due to the transportation fee paid. By a 30 minute bus commute, accessible neighborhoods are largely the same as those included by bike. PRT's TrueTime live bus-tracking app is our recommended method for tracking the buses, but Google Maps on mobile may be your best option for planning your commutes on public transit.

It is important to note that the two primary bus lines that serve CMU - the 61 and 71 lines (each with A, B, C, and D sublines) are the most crowded and delayed lines in Pittsburgh. In particular, on Fifth Avenue (71B, 71D) and the Murray-Forbes Avenue corridor (61C, 61D), buses that are full will no longer pick up students waiting at stops, which has been a consistent pain point (and point of GSA's advocacy!) for commuters to and from CMU.

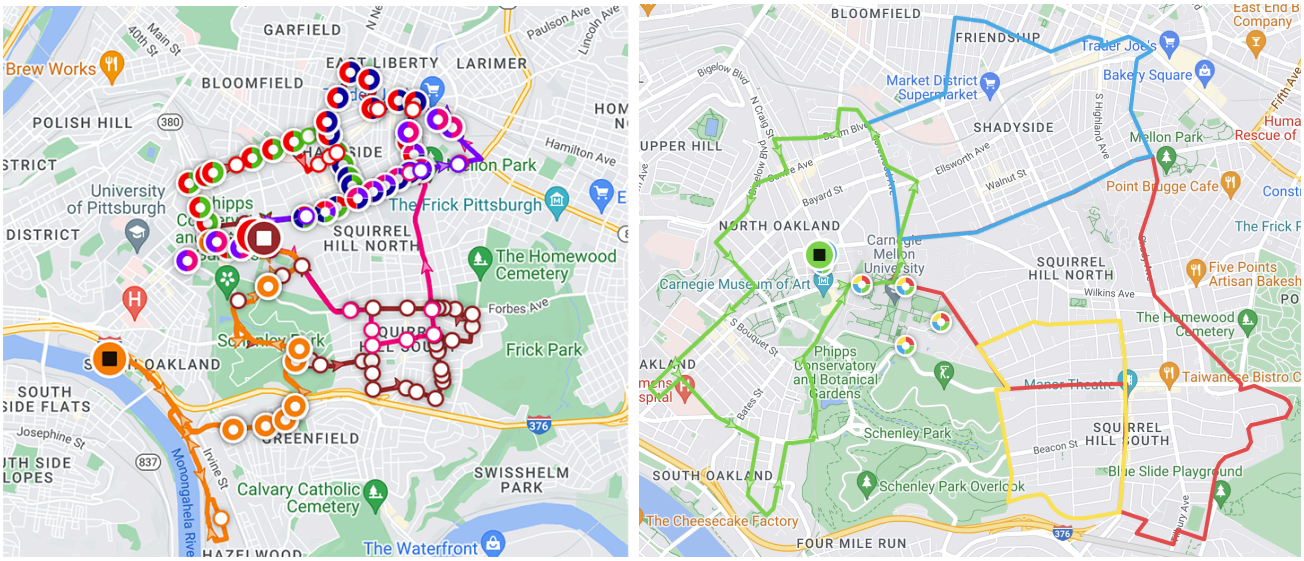
As a result, we suggest not relying fully on the bus system during peak hours (unless you plan to get on/off before/after the most crowded stops). The CMU Shuttle and Escort services, as well as bikeshare, scootershare, and personal wheeled vehicles can help supplement transit needs during and after these times. We hope these issues will hopefully be at least partially alleviated by the PRT's University Line Bus Rapid Transit project and associated line adjustments.

Table of Contents



30 minute public transit isochrome from CMU

Carnegie Mellon Shuttle & Escort Commute



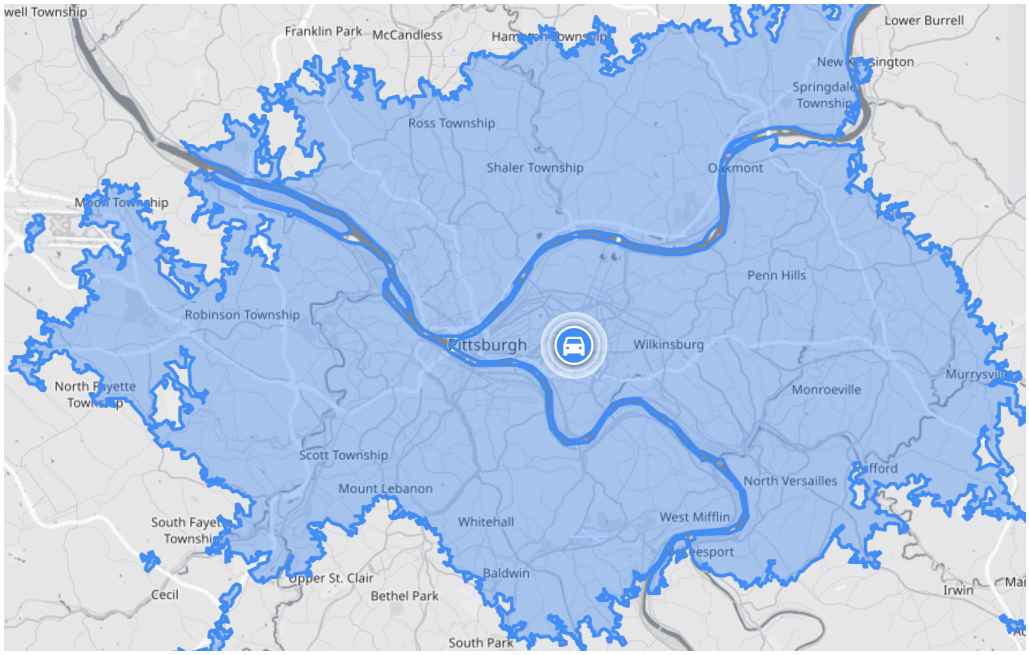
Maps showing the overlapping routes of CMU's fixed route shuttle service (L) and overlapping zones of CMU's drop-off escort service (R)

CMU's shuttle service runs on a fixed route with specific stops, starting as early as 7 a.m. for some routes and running into the evening. The shuttle currently serves Shadyside, Squirrel Hill, the Pittsburgh Technology Center (PTC), and Bakery Square. Additionally, any CMU student can ride the University of Pittsburgh's shuttles with their CMU ID.
For faculty, staff, and students residing in Oakland, Shadyside, and Squirrel Hill, CMU's escort service operates from 6:30 p.m. to 4:15 a.m., cycling every 45 minutes. This service offers free

transportation from campus to intersections that are not being served by the Shuttle at the time. For real-time tracking of the CMU Shuttle and Escorts, CMU uses the AndysBuses webpage and app. Pitt (University of Pittsburgh) shuttle tracking is provided through TransLoc. Show your CMU ID to board both shuttles and escorts. Use the shuttle service first during evenings – the escorts will not drop you off at intersections that the shuttle is actively serving.

Driving Commute

By a 30 minute drive, the neighborhoods accessible from CMU includes most of the city of Pittsburgh and extends into parts of the nearby townships of Ross, Penn Hills, Robinson, Monroeville, West Mifflin and Mt. Lebanon. However, rush hour in Pittsburgh can often be exacerbated by the weather, road construction, or sporting events. If you cross a river, expect to face bottlenecks due to the bridges and tunnels that allow access to the city center.
Although driving can be convenient, please note that CMU has very limited parking options on campus - there are less than 800 leased spaces available to all students (undergraduate *and* graduate). Though a carpool discount option does exist for lease holders, getting a lease itself is challenging. Temporary parking can be expensive: the East Campus Garage rate is $22 per day.



The thirty minute driving isochrome for CMU

From the Carnegie Mellon University administration's perspective, the university has committed in its 2022 Institutional Master Plan to focus "on people over vehicles and flexibility over status quo," with particular focus on "strategies that inherently encourage alternatives to single-occupant vehicle (SOV) use." This is motivated by the fact that CMU effectively pays **10 times more** per person to get to campus versus drive and park, in comparison to taking the bus, not including the opportunity cost of the land for parking. The GSA also supports the administration's modal

hierarchy. We continue to advocate for remote parking options, additional public transit capacity, and increased bike parking on campus, and would encourage students to think carefully if they truly need to drive to campus on a daily basis. If you're interested in joining GSA's advocacy around transportation on campus, reach out on our Engage with GSA form or email the VP Campus Affairs.

CMU Transportation Alternatives for Nearby Amenities

Because of the challenges of driving to campus, CMU has provided non-personal vehicle access to nearby amenities through the shuttle service as well as partnerships with Pitt and the PRT network. Note that the CMU-provided options generally go to and from campus. Do also know that CMU has a partnership with Zipcar, the largest US car-sharing company, as well as university discounts for rental cars from Enterprise, should you need a vehicle rental.

Amenity	Public Transit Options	CMU Transportation
Scotty's Market	N/A (on campus)	
Whole Foods	71A, 71B, 71C	B routes (7-11AM, 4:15-6:15PM M to F), AB routes (7AM-11:30PM M to F, 7AM-11:45PM weekends)
Trader Joe's, Bakery Square	71D, 75	Bakery Square (Long 8:30-10:30 AM, 4:30-6:30PM M to F), Bakery Square (Short 10:30AM-2:30PM M to F)
Market District Supermarket	71A, 71C, 75, P3	Pitt 20A (7AM to 2AM M to F, 5:30PM to 2AM weekends)
Downtown	61A, 61B, 61C, 67, 69, 71B	-
The Waterfront (Costco, mall)	61C, 61D; 64 from Squirrel Hill and Shadyside	-
North Side	Go Downtown, then T subway, or 54	-

Table of Contents

Renting Basics

Here, we present basics about the renting process in the United States, with specifics about Pittsburgh interspersed throughout. For a checklist-style guide, use Appendix 1: Signing a Lease.

About Leases

Lease dates normally start on the first of the month, although some may start mid-month (normally the 15th). Given the large population of college students in Pittsburgh, many landlords and management companies offer leases beginning on August 1st, but it is possible to find a lease in any month.

Leases are most commonly available for 12 months though some shorter term leases may be posted as well. Typically, a lease will end in the following year on the day prior to its signing (i.e. if the lease was signed on August 1, 2023, it will end on July 31, 2024). It is easiest to find a lease that coincides with the school year. If you know you will not need an apartment for the full 12 months, be sure to discuss this with your landlord or management company ahead of time to try to negotiate a deal. If you terminate a lease before the end date, there will likely be a penalty, up to and including paying out the remainder of the rent owed.

Per City of Pittsburgh code, no more than three (3) unrelated individuals can be listed as tenants on a lease agreement.

Scams

While the housing market in Pittsburgh is generally fair and safe, GSA has heard reports of scams that students have witnessed or fallen victim to. Here are some common signs of fraud:

- If you are asked to sign a lease or make a down payment before seeing the apartment.
- If you are asked to provide a down payment or security deposit that is larger than the advertised amount. (Note: if you are told to pay an international student fee, this is illegal and is a form of housing discrimination.)
- If you are required to make payments in “cash only.”
- If you are not provided with a written lease agreement or are asked to make a verbal commitment in exchange for payment.

If you are concerned about a particular landlord, check the Landlord Watch Project’s database.

Your legal rights as a tenant

As a tenant, you are legally protected to have a quiet, habitable place to live and to be protected from undue imposition or eviction by your landlord. A more exact list of Landlord-Tenant Laws in Pennsylvania can be found here. If you run into issues, you can schedule a meeting with CMU legal counsel, which is funded in part by your graduate student activities fee. You may also want to check out the Legal Assistance Program and Neighborhood Legal Services.

Table of Contents

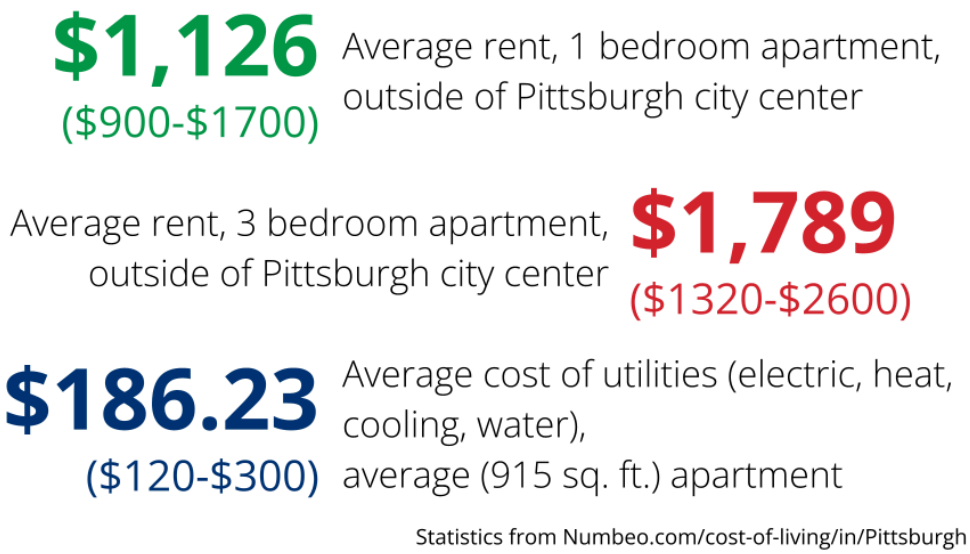
Basic Apartment Information

Payment of Rent

It is important to determine how and when you will be required to pay your rent. While some companies offer direct deposit or online payment options, many require a paper check either mailed or hand delivered to their office. Be sure to ask how payment needs to be made before you miss one! You should also determine two dates: (1) When the rent is due and (2) when it is considered late. Many companies require rent due by the first of the month and it is considered late a day or two after. If your rent is late, you may be subject to additional fees, or lose standing with the company which may affect your ability to renew a lease.

Utilities

An important aspect of any rental agreement is the responsibility for utilities payments (which may include heat, water, electricity, garbage, and internet). Every landlord and management company is different. Some leases include the cost of utilities in the monthly rent. Others hold tenants responsible for all utility bills. Some may cover the cost of certain utilities (such as water and garbage pick up), but not others (such as electricity and internet). Still, others may set a limit on the amount of utilities used in a given month, and charge tenants a premium on excessive use. It is important to understand your responsibility for utilities payments prior to signing a lease, and to factor these costs into your monthly budget.


$1,126
($900-$1700)
Average rent, 1 bedroom apartment, outside of Pittsburgh city center
Average rent, 3 bedroom apartment, outside of Pittsburgh city center
$1,789
($1320-$2600)
$186.23
($120-$300)
Average cost of utilities (electric, heat, cooling, water), average (915 sq. ft.) apartment
Statistics from Numbeo.com/cost-of-living/in/Pittsburgh

According to Numbeo, the average cost of utilities for a 915 square foot apartment in Pittsburgh is about $186.23 a month. Internet service costs an average of $30-70 a month depending on the plan. One of the biggest utility costs results from cooling or heating an apartment, meaning that you can expect higher bills in the winter and summer months. In warmer weeks, you can cool your home with air conditioning from a window unit or a central air system. Central air conditioning is more energy efficient and thus more affordable, however, most buildings do not

have central air unless they are newly built or recently renovated. If you use a window unit and are responsible for paying your electric bill, you will want to limit the number of hours that you operate the unit to keep costs low.
Heating an apartment during the winter can also be expensive. Typically homes in Pittsburgh are warmed through radiators, which may operate on electricity or natural gas. Natural gas is cheaper than electricity in Pittsburgh, so it is a good idea to ask your landlord how the house is heated if you are responsible for paying the heating bill. If the house has radiators, ask when the boiler is turned on for the winter. Central heating is also offered in some units, but is much less common.

Trash and Recycling

In Pittsburgh, trash pickup is weekly, but recycling is only picked up every other week, though this service is *free* (included in your city taxes). PGH.ST is a good resource to find the pickup schedule for your address. Check this flier to see what can and can't be recycled curbside: Recyclable and Non-Recyclable Items. Take a look at Recycle This Pittsburgh to answer questions about recycling specific items. CMU and Pitt also offer their own recycling programs for specialty items, such as shoes, batteries, linens, computers, and compost.
The city of Pittsburgh no longer accepts recycling in blue plastic bags. Recyclables must be placed loose in a blue recycling bin or clearly marked bin. Clean, dry plastic bags can be dropped off stores with a plastic bag recycling area. These can be found at Giant Eagle, Target, Lowe's, and Whole Foods.
The city does not pick up waste for composting, but there are a number of services that can provide you with a bucket for your scraps and will pick up the compost weekly or biweekly for around $30-40 monthly.

Laundry

Clothes washers and dryers are not a guaranteed amenity in Pittsburgh. Most apartments have a washer and dryer on the premises, though they may not be in the unit itself. Some apartments have coin operated washers. These costs are variable but may be around $3.50–$4.50 to wash and dry a load of laundry. If the washer is in the unit and the tenant is responsible for the water and electric bills, this can be a major source of utilities costs. If no washer and dryer are available on the premises, Pittsburgh has laundromats in every neighborhood. These laundromats generally cost about the same as a coin operated unit.

Parking

Having a car in Pittsburgh can be very useful, but free, off-street parking is not guaranteed in most places. It is important to know your options before potentially having to spend a great deal of money on parking fees. Most housing advertisements will include information about parking availability (whether there is a garage, private lot, driveway, street parking, etc.) There may be a monthly cost for private parking and you may have to sign a lease for a spot, so it is important to discuss this with the landlord or rental company.

Depending on the neighborhood, you may be required to purchase a permit to park on the street. It is important to check with the Pittsburgh Parking Authority (PPA) Portal to see whether your neighborhood is subject to a small $25 yearly fee. Most neighborhoods (with the exception of Squirrel Hill) require you to register your vehicle through the PPA. Also, being experienced in parallel parking is a necessary skill if you are planning to park on residential streets.
Do keep in mind that CMU discourages driving to campus, so a car may not be always necessary; see the 'Driving Commute' section for more information.

Accessibility

It is very important to consider the routes of access to your living situation. Many apartment buildings are converted homes, which most likely will not have an elevator. This is also generally true for smaller or older apartment buildings. Given Pittsburgh's geography, many homes are built on a slope and can have several steps leading up to the entrance. You may want to consider how easily you will be able to move in your boxes and large furniture or if its inaccessibility will prevent you from accomplishing daily tasks, such as transporting groceries.

Rental Management Companies

There are many management companies, both large and small, in neighborhoods around the CMU campus. Below we have listed some of the names of the largest companies that students or their peers report using. **The CMU GSA does not endorse any rental company;** these are just listed for reference. We have also included the ratings of each company on Google (★) and Yelp (💛) for your reference.
Do keep in mind that this is just a list of large management companies and doesn't include independent or single-property landlords. Smaller landlords are much more likely to higher-variance in terms of their ability and speed in responding to issues.

Delta Property Management 2.9/5 2.3/5	Forbes Management 4.2/5 2.8/5	Forward Management 1.8/5 1.6/5	John CR Kelly Realty 4.1/5 2.3/5	Lobos Management 4.2/5 1.7/5
Mozart Management 2.5/5 1.6/5	Rockwell Realty 3.3/5 3.3/5	Sterling Land Company 3.6/5 2.7/5	Union Real Estate 4.1/5 2.3/5	Walnut Capital 3.9/5 2.2/5

Table of Contents

Purchasing a Home in Pittsburgh

We recognize that many folks are moving with partners and may want to put down roots during or after their time here in Pittsburgh. The city's real estate market is known for its relatively low prices compared to other major metropolitan areas, making it an attractive option for those looking to buy rather than rent; a mortgage payment can often be lower than renting, particularly in neighborhoods slightly further away from CMU (e.g. Greenfield, Bloomfield, Friendship).

The biggest drawback of purchasing a home in Pittsburgh is the general age of residences, with homes built as early as 1870 and the average build date in the 1940s. The price of homes varies significantly based on factors such as age, condition, and move-in-readiness. Older homes, particularly those built before the mid-20th century, are prevalent in many of the city's historic neighborhoods like Lawrenceville and Bloomfield. Most homes that will be more affordable will likely be townhomes, condominiums, or apartments. According to Zillow, the average home price in Pittsburgh in 2024 is $234,424, but prices in Shadyside ($585K), Squirrel Hill South ($489K), and other nearby neighborhoods can be much higher, according to Realtor.com. Home prices in Oakland are notably lower, but tend to be much older, or much smaller units.

A number of real estate companies operate in Pittsburgh. The most prominent of these are Howard Hanna, Berkshire Hathaway, RE/MAX Realty, Coldwell Banker, and Keller Williams, but we recommend speaking with realtors at these companies (among others) and weighing all options before selecting one realtor to work with. Currently, CMU employees can qualify for Real Estate Services and Benefits through CMU. It is unclear if graduate students automatically qualify for these benefits, but reaching out to the services listed on that website may provide additional benefits.

Other resources for planning a home purchase are listed below.

- Buying a Home - US Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Buying a Home Guide - Investopedia
- How to Prepare to Buy a Home - National Association of Realtors

Table of Contents

Additional Resources

Web Pages and links maintained by (other) CMU entities

- GSA Housing FAQ
- CMU Housing's Off-Campus Housing Marketplace
- Student Affairs Off-Campus Housing page
- Office of Graduate and Postdoctoral Affairs Website
- Office of International Education Website
- University Health Services' Student Health Advising Council: Housing and Financial Resources, with descriptions of the following external programs: Legal Assistance Program, Allegheny Link, Housing Stabilization Program, Housing Resources | URA, Neighborhood Legal Services, Hebrew Free Loan Association, Landlord Watchlist

Other Resources

- If you find you need legal advice in dealing with a landlord: CMU offers free 20 minute legal consultations to students. Information can be found here.
- If you need help finding roommates, CMU also has a portal for finding roommates and off campus housing, accessible here. Facebook groups and Reddit may be options for connecting with people in Pittsburgh (though not all are CMU students).
    - To verify if someone else is in fact a CMU student, you can check the CMU directory with their Andrew ID. Be aware that people can opt out from appearing in this directory, though.
- If you need help figuring out how to set up utilities, you can find details here.
- If you need help with moving expenses:
    - Graduate Student Transition (GST) Loan (up to 75% of your gross monthly salary/stipend) for first-semester graduate students to assist with moving/transitional expenses. *Contact your department* for a Transition Loan form.
    - Emergency Student Loans (interest-free loans, repayable within 30 days) are available to students for academic supplies, medication, food or other unforeseeable circumstances. To apply, email the Office of the Dean of Students.

Table of Contents

Appendix 1: Signing a Lease: A Checklist

There are a number of important factors to consider before signing a lease to ensure that you can be happy with your living arrangements and work well with your potential landlord or management company. The following lists are meant to provide some general questions to consider when inquiring about a listing or touring an apartment. While the relative importance of each question and answer may differ from renter to renter, it is important to take some time to consider your priorities before signing a rental agreement. Please note that these checklists are not comprehensive and are not legal advice.

Financial

- ☐ Request information on utilities: who pays for them?
- ☐ Are utilities paid separately? Are they metered or pro-rated?
- ☐ When is the rent due and how should it be paid?
- ☐ If there are multiple people living in the apartment, can they pay their portion the rent individually?
- ☐ Is subletting allowed? (Subletting is when a tenant rents out space to another person for a certain amount of time.)
- ☐ What kind of verification of your income do they accept and under what circumstances do they accept a guarantor instead? Is a credit check required?
- ☐ What happens if multiple people sign the lease and one moves out? (i.e. If you rent an apartment with another CMU student and they want to move out while you wish to stay in the unit).
- ☐ What are options for breaking the lease early? Note: this often has a financial penalty.
- ☐ Is renter's insurance necessary? How much do you need?
- ☐ What is the policy on rent increases? (Rents will often increase a bit for each subsequent year you renew a lease due to inflation alone.)
- ☐ What are the inspection criteria for the security deposit? What damages will I be penalized for?

Security

- ☐ How are packages and mail received/protected from theft? Is the mailroom only accessible to residents or employees, or can anyone access your packages when they are delivered?
- ☐ Are there outdoor lights which will get you safely in and out at night?
- ☐ Is there a fire extinguisher accessible? Check the location and batteries on smoke and carbon monoxide detectors.
- ☐ Is the apartment in a secure-access building? Are there separate keys to get into the building and your unit, or is only the unit locked?
- ☐ When and for what reasons can the landlord enter the unit? How much notice is given?

Table of Contents

Amenities

- [ ] What additional amenities are located in the building: gym or pool in building, meeting/social rooms, etc? (Note that much of this may be available for free on campus anyhow)
- [ ] Does the rental company assist with transportation? (e.g. some companies run shuttles that pass by CMU)
- [ ] What kind of heating/AC is there?
- [ ] Are there window A/C units? If so, who takes care of installment and repair? If not, what is the policy for installing more?
- [ ] When and where is garbage and recycling collected?
- [ ] Is there additional storage available in the building?

Maintenance

- [ ] Who is responsible for making repairs? Will you be reimbursed for costs of repairs?
- [ ] If there is a maintenance emergency, what is the number of the on-call maintenance person? What is their response time?
- [ ] What kind of fuses does the apartment use and is the resident responsible for replacing them if one blows?
- [ ] Who is responsible for replacing bulbs in permanent light fixtures? (If they are unusual, you may need to ask where they can be found)
- [ ] Can the resident paint the walls?
- [ ] Is there regular pest control?
- [ ] What are the rules about hanging pictures and making holes in the walls?
- [ ] Can the landlord make modifications to the unit without renter approval?

Apartment Inspection

- [ ] Check the windows, doors, and around kitchen/bathroom sinks to make sure there are not cracks where pests can get in.
- [ ] Check around the bathroom fixtures and kitchen sinks for water damage.
- [ ] Look at the ceilings and walls for water damage.
- [ ] Check the locks on the doors and windows - Are they secure?
- [ ] What does the basement look like? Is it secure?
- [ ] How should you document and report damages that occurred before you moved in? (Be sure to take pictures of any damage to your apartment when moving in, or else you could be penalized).

Pets

- [ ] What are the rules about pets? Is there a pet deposit/fee?
- [ ] What documents/training do I need to provide for my pet?
- [ ] Can my guests bring their pets when they visit?

- ☐ Are there any city laws/apartment rules preventing your pet from living in the apartment? (Noise, breed, special accommodations, etc)
- ☐ Where is the nearest veterinarian clinic that can service your pet?
- ☐ Where is the nearest pet shop that can supply your pet's needs?
- ☐ Are there pet-friendly areas (off-leash areas, pet-friendly parks) nearby?
- ☐ Will my pet be a good fit for this apartment? Is there a good space for litter boxes and supplies in the apartment?
- ☐ Are the building maintenance practices safe for my pet? (Potential of salt burns from rock salts and ice melts)

Miscellaneous

- ☐ Are the walls thin?
- ☐ Who are the residents in the other units in the building (i.e. college students, working adults, elderly)?
- ☐ Is there a noise restriction for the building/neighborhood? Are there other things around that could cause noise (e.g. restaurants, trash pickup)?
- ☐ Where can I go to get groceries and other amenities? Can they be accessed through convenient public transportation?

Your Rights as a Tenant

- ☐ As a tenant, you are legally protected to have a quiet, habitable place to live and to be protected from undue imposition or eviction by your landlord. A more exact list of Landlord-Tenant Laws in Pennsylvania can be found here.
- ☐ If you are concerned about a particular landlord, check out the Landlord Watch PA database.

For more easy to read and access guidance on your rights as a tenant, check out any of the following resources:

- ☐ Schedule a meeting with CMU legal counsel, which is funded in part by your graduate student activities fee.
- ☐ Here is a great website (provided by the University of Pittsburgh) about what you should expect in your apartment and in your dealings with your landlord.
- ☐ This online resource provides context from a legal perspective.

Table of Contents

Appendix 2: Revisions Log

May 31, 2024: Major revisions by Campus Affairs Committee, GSA VPCA Anthony Cheng

- Moved lease-signing checklist to appendix
- Added 'Purchasing a Home in Pittsburgh' section
- Gathered new data for 'Where CMU Graduate Students Live' and 'Data from Student Surveys' section
- Added additional context and information in the transportation section.
- Added additional context and information in the Basic Apartment Info section
- Revised "Additional Resources" section
- Updated "Rental Management Companies" section

March 27, 2019: Initial version finalized and publicized, GSA VPCA Stephanie Laughton